

WINCHESTER COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 2021

~~as adopted~~ Revised 5/30/21

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

**Sustainability –continuing into the future without decaying or collapsing.
–meeting today’s needs without sacrificing the future.**

That is the key principle of Winchester’s future vision. This Plan charts a new path toward environmental, economic, and social sustainability. It promotes a walkable community made up of vibrant mixed use neighborhoods that honor Winchester’s rich history and use the latest technology. This Plan reflects City Council’s philosophy of proactively improving citizens’ quality of life. It is a strategy to make vision into reality –to make Winchester a Community of Choice.

PLAN HIGHLIGHTS

Making this Plan involved a new and highly public approach. Early in the process, elected officials and city staff undertook a careful and comprehensive analysis of community conditions. Citizens helped develop citywide goals and objectives, as well as specific neighborhoods’ issues. The focus of this strategic planning document shifts from a citywide perspective to look at the city as a series of neighborhoods **organized within ten Planning Areas.**

Using the framework **of the ten Planning Areas**, the Plan states specific objectives and actions to improve the City. Alternative Development Concepts illustrate a future vision of the City consistent with New Urbanism: higher densities and walkable community. It maintains stable single-family residential neighborhoods, but advocates for either infill or redevelopment embracing a mixed-use approach to land use and zoning. This Traditional Neighborhood Design is consistent with Winchester’s heritage and may also bring new vigor and prosperity to its communities.

PLANNING HISTORY

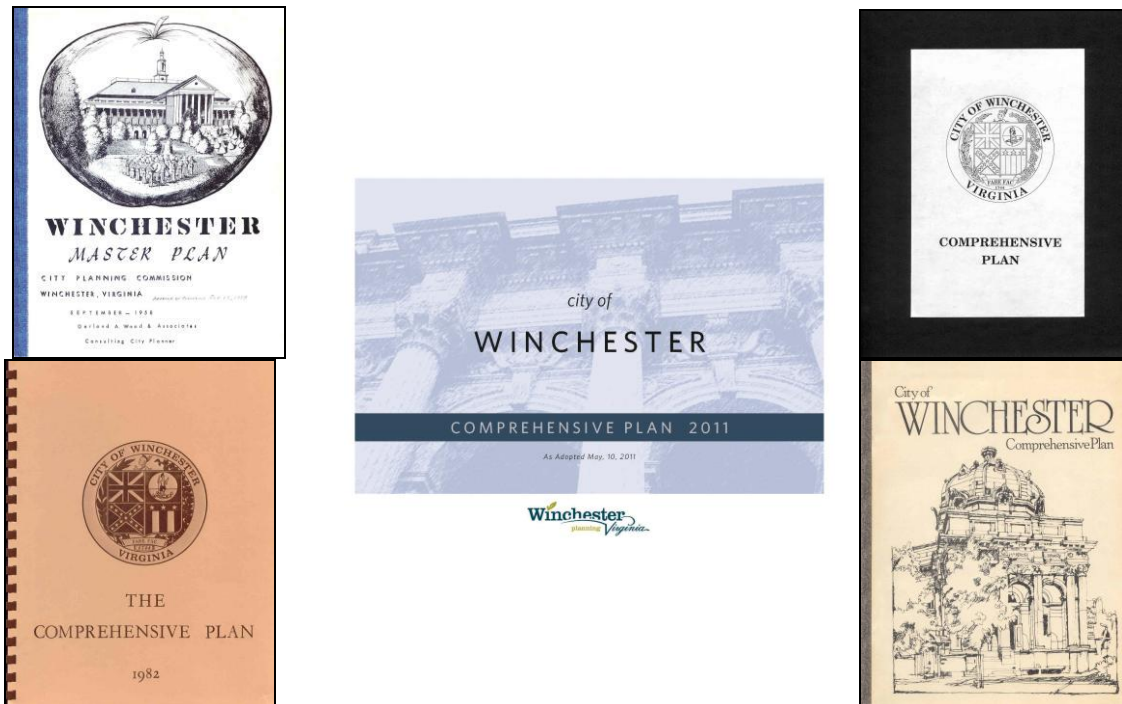
This is ~~an~~ **fairly** extensive update of Winchester’s **fifth** major comprehensive plan, ~~originally finished in 2011~~. In the mid-1700s Colonel James Wood and Lord Thomas Fairfax drafted the original master plan layout of the **old grid street town**. Winchester **officially became a city in 1874 and** grew in a largely organic way. **The City grew geographically by way of annexations of Frederick County land in 1905 and 1921 resulting in an area of 2.35 square miles by 1921.**~~until~~

In 1958,~~when~~ the Common Council adopted the first **modern** ~~true~~ Comprehensive Plan. At that time, Winchester was much smaller **geographically and from a population standpoint than it is today** and only partly subject to a zoning ordinance **and zoning map**. Interstate 81 was just a set of blueprints.

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The City Council adopted the second comprehensive plan in 1974. It followed the city's completion of the Loudoun Street Pedestrian Mall and its near tripling in size through annexation of 5.8 square miles in early 1971 that brought the City to its current size of 9.3 square miles. The Division of State Planning and Community Affairs prepared the 1974 plan. It was a detailed document covering all aspects of city development, including analyses of physical conditions, land use, transportation, and community facilities.



Covers of the 1958, 1974, 1982, 1991, and 2011 Comprehensive Plans.

In 1982, ~~brought~~ a third comprehensive plan was adopted. It responded to the shift of department stores from Old Town to the then newly constructed Apple Blossom Mall, and ~~The 1982 Plan~~ only supplemented the earlier version, noting changed conditions and new approaches to old problems. Winchester was generally seeking the status quo, and the 1982 Plan lacked a chapter on implementation.

The fourth comprehensive plan, adopted in 1991, echoed the 1982 and 1974 efforts. It reflected the concerns about development pressures from the Washington metropolitan area on Winchester and Frederick County. The 1991 Plan resulted in extensive City-sponsored rezonings to curb what was believed to be too much apartment and townhouse development but no rapid change in the city, as it continued to grow in a suburban way.

In 1999 and 2005, the Comprehensive Plan was updated in parts. The 1999 Plan rewrote the transportation and future land use chapters, examining the inconsistencies between the existing zoning map and the future land use map. Again, the City undertook

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rezonings. Many of the changes were aimed at further reducing renter-occupied apartment and townhouse development and increasing suburban style ownership of single-family homes.

The 2005 Plan update primarily focused on a changed vision for the Meadow Branch Avenue corridor south of the hospital. It was the first Plan to advocate New Urbanism principles outside of the historic downtown area and resulted in a significantly different zoning pattern that permitted higher densities and mixing of land uses in an area previously zoned for low density, single-family residential use only.

By 2009, the City recognized the need for a whole new format for the Comprehensive Plan, one that emphasized sustainability and better integrated economic development initiatives with planning and zoning goals and objectives. The resulting 2011 Comprehensive Plan included chapters on two types of sustainability- economic and environmental. It also addressed social equity as a third form of sustainability. The Transportation chapter was retitled the Mobility chapter to deemphasize road building and instead focus more on alternative modes of transportation including walking and cycling.

Perhaps the two biggest changes included in the 2011 Comprehensive Plan were the inclusion of redevelopment scenarios for each of ten geographic planning areas in Chapter 11 and the replacement of a traditional Future Land Use Map with a Character Map to reflect the growing interest in mixed use development and a greater focus on identifying areas of the City where change is advocated as compared with other areas where the existing character of development should be preserved.

The 2011 Plan was recognized by the Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association in 2013 as the Outstanding Comprehensive Plan for a Small City. The judges felt that the innovative format provided an excellent means for conveying the future vision of the City.

~~Since 1870, Winchester has been an independent city. Frederick County surrounds the city and has its offices downtown, but the city is a separate political unit. There are 35-38 independent cities in Virginia, the only state where this kind of division is common. This Plan does not assume any outright merging of Winchester and Frederick County. However, it does expect partnership, cooperation, and consolidation of certain services where it makes sense to do so. The city and county rely on each other, and planners in both places should not forget each other.~~

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE PLAN

The Code of Virginia guides how Comprehensive Plans are to be prepared and adopted and what must be included. It specifically lays out the purpose of the Plan and who is responsible for preparing and adopting it. Appendix 1 provides further detail on the Virginia Code provisions for Comprehensive Plans.

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The Plan must be made with the express purpose of “guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted and harmonious development of the territory which will, in accordance with present and probable future needs and resources, best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants, including the elderly and persons with disabilities.”

Even though Winchester is completely included within the Winchester-Frederick County Metropolitan Planning Organization (Win-Fred MPO), the City must still develop a mobility plan that designates a system of infrastructure needs and recommendations. The Plan includes mobility options that support the recommended form of development: roadways, bike and pedestrian trails, sidewalks, railways, bridges, and public transportation facilities. The plan acknowledges a hierarchy of roads such as expressways, arterials, and collectors.

This Plan is a guide for a desired future vision, not an ordinance or code such as the City Zoning Ordinance. It outlines what should be done rather than what must be done. This update of the Plan continues to divides the City into ten Planning Areas for purposes of the careful studies and subsequent recommendations for redevelopment. It is strategic in nature and calls out specific actions that can be undertaken both short term as well as long term. The Plan is closely associated with the City’s Capital Improvement Program (CIP) which spells out expenditures for reinvesting public funds in the community.

PLAN UPDATE PROCESS

To create this update of the Winchester Comprehensive Plan, citizens, elected officials, and ~~appointed officials~~ the Planning Commission worked closely with a ~~wide~~ cross-section of City staff ~~and, for the first time in decades, a consultant team.~~ There were four public input sessions held in 2019, allowing residents to provide input. ~~Appendix 2 provides an overview of the collaborative effort employed for this Plan update.~~

~~Coincidentally, the City’s Economic Development Authority employed the services of Herd Planning & Design, RPG, and Baker, together with the real estate consulting firm S. Patz & Associates, Inc., to prepare an Economic Development Master Plan. This separate but closely related effort entailed a market analysis for various types of economic development, including commercial retail, hotel, office, assisted living, and multifamily residential development in the Winchester-Frederick County market. The Study examined six potential Catalyst Sites in the City. This effort and its findings are addressed in the Economic Sustainability chapter of this Plan.~~

The City engaged the services of EPR, PC consulting firm to prepare updated graphics for the Redevelopment Scenarios in Chapter Eleven to to update the citywide Character Map. Otherwise, the Plan update was undertaken by City Planning Department staff, including assistance from various college and high school interns, thus saving the City the expense of hiring outside consultants to rewrite the Plan.

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PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Winchester citizenry and economic community helped shape the future vision presented here. Outreach efforts by city staff included a webpage devoted to the Comprehensive Plan on the City's website, a 2008 2019 Citizen Survey, a Visioning Exercise, a series of initial public inputs sessions during the summer of 2008, a public feedback session in February of 2010, and the state-mandated public hearings before final Planning Commission's and City Council votes. Appendix 3 provides an overview of the public participation outreach efforts.

One of the first major steps in the City's Comprehensive Plan update process was to conduct four public input meetings during June and July of 2008 through July and August of 2019. At the input sessions, groups of citizens conducted a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-&-Threats (SWOT) Analysis for the future of Winchester. Following the SWOT Analysis, participants joined small breakout groups to conduct mapping exercises in which they marked up base maps to identify features to preserve and others to change, add, or improve.

Some common themes and ideas emerged during the SWOT exercises at the four initial input meetings.

Strengths and Opportunities were:

- Location
- Diverse demographics
- Public facilities
- major institutions
- Shenandoah University
- Historic character & architecture
- Local government & civic engagement
- Friendly people
- balance small town feel within commuting distance of big city
- Cultural opportunities & institutions
- Winchester Medical Center

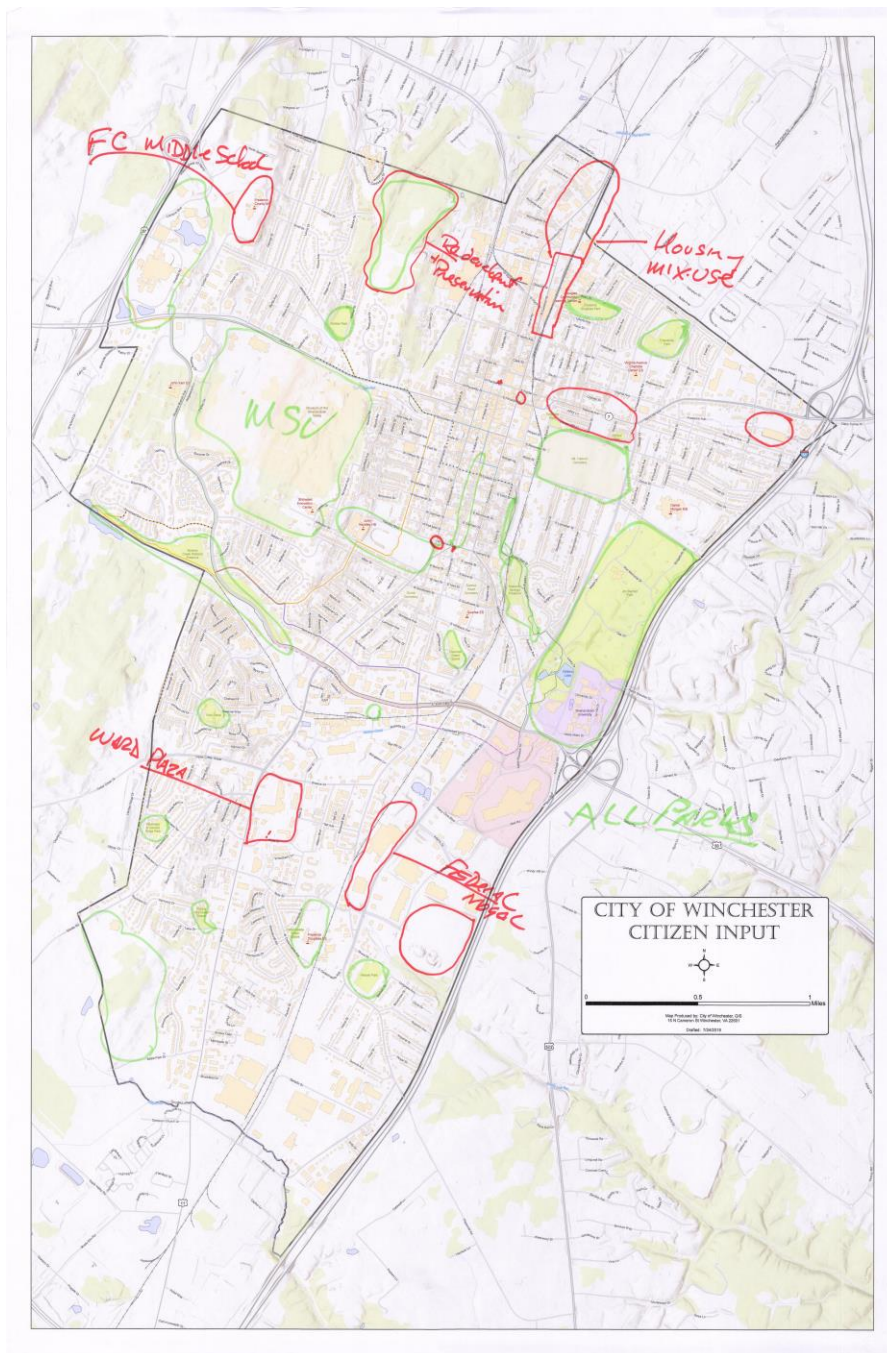
Weaknesses and Threats were:

- aging city infrastructure
- Lack of affordable housing
- Limited transit & regional transportation
- Lack of walkability
- Lack of access to grocery stores
- below average educational levels
- relatively low income
- cost of gas and commuting
- concern about the city becoming a magnet for dependent populations
- Failure to address homelessness issue
- unclear competitive niche

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- Lopsided focus on downtown
- Historic income split
- A need for diversity on City Council
- Insufficient directional information
- sprawl and urbanization of Frederick County which pulls economic development away from the City
- concern about the university and hospital being non-taxable



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There was substantial general agreement among participants on many ideas, including:

- The need for revitalization and redevelopment of various key sites, especially Ward's plaza, and other older, underused commercial and industrial sites
- The need for continued efforts at historic preservation and rehabilitation, especially in the downtown area, including new uses, mixed uses, and somewhat greater intensification
- The need to preserve, enhance, and expand the existing parks and trails system, including completing the Green Circle Trail
- The need for infrastructure upgrades, especially key street connections and sidewalks, including completing the connection of Meadow Branch Avenue.

There also seemed to be a broadly felt, generally positive view toward growth and revitalization within the City, including the New Urbanist principles of mixed-use, connectivity, and human-scale, pedestrian-friendly development. There was also a generally positive view toward the trend of diversity in population and housing. There also appeared to be broadly shared concerns about the impact of rising fuel costs, the impact of growth in the County that could compete or conflict with the City's efforts to attract jobs, the recognition of the need for higher educational levels in the local labor force, and the need to find a competitive niche for commercial and industrial growth.

SYNTHESIS OF INPUTS

Armed with a wealth of detailed studies and surveys, as well as the extensive citizen input from formal and informal public outreach, the City Planning Commission then worked closely with City staff ~~and the consulting team~~ to refine citywide goals and objectives, stated in Chapter 3.

~~The Planning Commission dedicated time during many work sessions and meetings to discussing what would go into this update. The Commission worked with City Council to clarify the vision of Winchester's future. Consultants presented an Economic Market Analysis, then helped the Commission, Council, and staff identify potential locations for Alternative Development Scenarios—examples to show what change in Winchester might look like.~~ Chapter 11 focuses on sustainable growth in each of the ten Planning Areas, noting critical properties with scenarios for how they might change.

Citizens gave good input as to where change should occur and where neighborhoods should stay the same. Planning for the City's future is less about controlling future land uses and more about achieving a shared vision for neighborhood revitalization and economic development citywide. The Character Map and Conceptual Redevelopment Plan will help the City guide and promote the kind of change and vitality called for in its future vision. They may also enhance individual property rights. These maps show the broad character of each neighborhood, as well as specific ideas for redevelopment on key sites. They are the cornerstone of the City's new vision for the future. The Character Map and Conceptual Redevelopment Plan are described in further detail in Chapter 9.

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PUBLIC ENDORSEMENT

There was high turnover in City Council and the city administration while this plan was being made. A series of two on two meetings helped city councilors understand the new direction being recommended in the updated Plan as compared to the old status quo. Elected officials shared their individual concerns.

Staff posted early drafts of the plan to the City's website for public viewing. In early 2009, the City gained two opportunities to communicate ideas for improving Berryville Avenue Corridor. First, a student in an Urban Planning course at the University of Virginia offered to create a digital model of the Berryville Avenue corridor redevelopment concept using Google brand Sketch Up software. His YouTube video was a virtual bird's eye tour of the proposed corridor, complete with new mobility and land use elements. The City also entered social media with a Facebook account. A link to the Berryville Avenue YouTube video was among the early content posted on the City's Facebook wall for fans to review.

Staff posted early drafts of the plan to the City's website for public viewing. To hear from the general public, Planning staff held a mid course Public Input Session in February of 2010. The public could see how the input from the four initial public input sessions had been added to the draft goals and objectives, the draft Character Map, and the proposed alternative development scenarios. An overview of the 2010 Public Input Session is included in Appendix 3.

Citizens had questions as to the impacts the various redevelopment scenarios on quality of life, where quality of life was being measured by today's standards (i.e. how long it takes to drive one's personal automobile from one's single family home to other city destinations). The concerns illustrated how the recommendations contained in this Plan anticipate changes to lifestyles and changes to the way people interface between home, work, recreation, and shopping in the future.

Plan adoption included a public hearing by the Planning Commission on April 19, 2011 at which only two citizens spoke. The Commission forwarded a final recommendation to City Council with some changes to the Environmental Chapter (Chapter 5) as recommended by the City's Natural Resources Advisory Board. There were also some minor changes to language in Chapter 9 pertaining to TDRs and the Frederick County Plan which was undergoing an update at the same time as the City's Plan. A public hearing was then held by City Council prior to formal adoption of the Plan by City Council on the date noted on May 10, 2011.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of 2020's COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on this Comprehensive Plan's composing, review and approval process. Public Endorsement of the Comprehensive Plan was either delayed considerably or moved online. As is standard, staff posted early drafts of the Comprehensive Plan to the City's website for public viewing. The Planning Commission was able to hold a public hearing on August 31, 2021, during which the Comprehensive Plan was approved. It was then

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forwarded to City Council and, following a second public hearing on _____,
officially approved.